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# Meat Matters

## *Distance in Damien Hirst*

Meat is the moment when what remained hidden to us is opened up. The animal's insides become outsides. Its depth of form becomes a surface, and its depth of being becomes the thin lifelessness of an object exposed. Meat makes the animal insides visible, and through sight the animal body becomes knowable. And while meat serves as a means for us to take in the animal visually and intellectually, it also marks the moment when the animal becomes physically consumable.

In meat there is a transformation from living to dead, from hidden to revealed, and from indigestible to edible. As the marker of this change, meat has a visceral materiality. The material form of dead animal flesh is haunted by the trace of a life transformed into an object through the violence of death. The willful life of an animal becomes an object that shows little ability to resist human understanding, manipulation, and consumption.

Many of Damien Hirst's best-known works grapple with the seemingly alchemical, violent transformation of life to death and opaque to knowable as animals become meat. To understand the significance of such alchemy, this chapter traces meat as the metaphysical moment when the animal is killed for full presence, material, and meaning. Nature is laid bare, made lifeless and exposed, in order to be subsumed within cultural intelligibility. At the same time, the notion that nature can be made fully present to us is worth

reconsidering. How do the metaphors of “nature hiding” and “nature revealed” ground our understanding of animals, and how might we begin to think outside of this predominant approach to nature?

Hirst has created a number of works that involve whole animals or cut-up animal parts. These works range from animal parts in jars or tanks of formaldehyde, as in *The Lovers' Cabinets* (1991) and *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything* (1996), to whole animals in formaldehyde, as with *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding* (1991) and *Away from the Flock* (1994). In some of these pieces, the animals or their parts are placed on shelves as if in a natural history exhibit or in a biology laboratory; in others, the use of livestock animals—cattle, pigs, and sheep—recalls cutting animals for consumption.

Hirst has a long-standing interest in medical specimens, and intertwined with this is a curiosity about death and dead bodies, evident from early work as a student at Goldsmiths onward. His medical fascination is evident in an early show he curated called *Modern Medicine* (1989), and in his more developed works that explicitly use laboratory instruments and specimens. Hirst's citation of dissection and vivisection provides a means of reading his use of animals as material for art. By leveraging this history of cutting open animals, the artist is plying animal death as an avenue for human knowledge of nature and of ourselves, or, as Hirst says, “that whole idea of killing things to look at them.”<sup>1</sup> As we shall see with Francis Bacon, one does not simply “look at them,” but the insides are exposed as a visually accessible outside to be interrogated for the benefit of human knowledge.

The relationship between meat and knowing can be found in Bacon's justification for dissection and vivisection. For this seventeenth-century natural scientist, knowledge attained in cutting open animals helps restore humans to an Edenic world. Such claims about the ability of science to restore human well-being are furthered by G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy. For Hegel, through dialectic tension, the material world is subsumed by consciousness into full knowledge and intelligibility. In his *Encyclopedia*, eating becomes the transformation of dead matter into life, and intellectual consumption transforms

matter into self-presence. These valences of dissection and consumption provide a means of grappling with Hirst's work. At the same time, as we shall see throughout this chapter, meat is never simply the animal made intelligible; meat has its own frictions that prevent human intellectual and physical consumption of the animal.

### CUTTING OPEN

*Mother and Child, Divided* (1993, Figure 1) is Hirst's first work to display the full bodies of large animals cut open. The work led to his winning the Turner Prize in 1995. In this particular piece, the artist has bisected the bodies of a cow and a calf by cutting each from head to tail. The halves are then encased in glass tanks of formaldehyde. The four tanks with the animal halves are separated by a narrow space of a few feet, and the calf and cow are placed one in front of the other. The animals appear to be pristine specimens in some sort of natural history display. Viewers are often repulsed or shocked at the visceral materiality of the sculpture, yet at the same time they are captured by wonder at the insides of these domesticated animals. It is a double reaction often provoked by Hirst's work: a repulsion at the materiality of the piece, and an intellectual curiosity about the animal and the making of the work. Hirst succinctly describes this: "Animals become meat. That's abstract."<sup>2</sup> This move from material to abstraction is essential for understanding Hirst, as well as the historical and philosophical tradition of dissection that informs his work.

Many pursuits of knowledge about nature are conducted under the simple claim made by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus: "Nature loves to hide." Like much of Heraclitus' work, this aphorism is incredibly suggestive, while leaving basic assumptions and details unspoken. His phrase has generally been taken to mean that nature veils itself, or that the essential nature of things is hidden.<sup>3</sup> It is not simply that nature remains unknown, but rather that it is in the nature of nature to hide. It "loves" to hide; its proclivity is to remain unknown and out of human grasp. If nature hides, it is not infinitely unknowable; rather, hiding implies its opposite: finding. Inquiry from the Greeks on has taken Heraclitus' phrase as impetus to lift the veil on nature



FIGURE 1 Damien Hirst, *Mother and Child, Divided*, 1993. Steel, GRP composites, glass, silicone sealant, cow, calf, and formaldehyde solution.  $74.8 \times 126.97 \times 42.91$  in ( $1900 \times 3225 \times 1090$  mm)  $\times 2$  tanks. Photographed by Prudence Cuming Associates. © 2011 Hirst Holdings Limited and Damien Hirst. All rights reserved, ARS, New York / DACS, London.

and reveal what has been kept hidden from us. As we shall see, cutting animals open serves as one way of lifting the veil, exposing the interiors as visually accessible exteriors.

Heraclitus' aphorism sets up an antagonistic relationship with nature. Revealing nature would be to go against its pleasures; what nature loves is to

hide. We go against nature's nature for the sake of human knowledge. Nature hidden by a veil heightens the metaphors of penetration, violence, and denuding, which become the operative images of revealing and knowing nature: for the sake of our pleasure in knowing, we rend the veil of nature's pleasure.

In the spirit of Heraclitus, the early modern essayist Bacon pursues his experimental inquiry into various properties of nature. While Bacon's experimental method is not the detailed procedures of modern science, his trials were novel in their attempt to ground knowledge on repeatable experiences rather than on speculative reasoning alone. He modeled his inquiries into nature on early modern trial inquisitions<sup>4</sup>; nature was on trial and must be tested in order to find its secrets. Because nature hides, artificial means are necessary to pry open its truths: "The secrets of nature are better revealed under the torture of experiments than when they follow their natural course."<sup>5</sup> Bacon's *Novum Organum*, or "new instrument," provides both a logic and an empirical instrumentation for experimenting on nature, or torturing "her" into confessing what remained hidden. Its methods are intended to supplant the speculative theory and logic of Aristotle's *Organum*, which at the time held sway in science and natural history.

Bacon shows a similar spirit of inquiry in his earlier work, *The Advancement of Learning*: "Neither ought a man to make scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his whole object."<sup>6</sup> Caroline Merchant parallels Bacon's inquiry into nature with "the interrogations of the witch trials and the mechanical devices used to torture witches," including "the supposed sexual crimes and practices of witches."<sup>7</sup> Added to the metaphor of nature as veiled and hiding secrets is that of witchery with its magical practices that defy human understanding. Bacon's method was to bring nature from its hiding places into the light, from distance into full presence, and from witchery into reason and intelligibility. He shifts nature from interiors unseen and unknowable to interiors cut open as exteriors exposed for human accessibility.

Bacon's job was that of inversion: turning the "holes and corners" inside out, and so bringing the corners nearer and making the dark holes into visible

surfaces. Implicit in the *Novum Organum* is what contemporary philosopher Jacques Derrida calls the logic of presence. Simon Lumsden summarizes Derrida's position thus: "This metaphysics of presence aspires to master objective being, it claims that being can be understood in Heidegger's terms ontically, and that being is definable and knowable. Being is presented *exclusively* as something perceived, intuited and known, and is thereby reduced to an expression of the perceiving and knowing subject."<sup>8</sup> As Derrida notes, *being*, as a fundamental category for an object, is here dependent on human perception. We make things in nature present by our attention to them; they become present to us. In the human demand for intelligible presence, the vacuous nature of holes and corners becomes objects of scrutiny to be filled or penetrated—or, better yet, turned inside out and so made into easily reachable surfaces and nonvacuous objects. It is worth asking: Why can nature not retain holes and corners? Why must it become objective being that can be disclosed to the human knower? It is a set of questions that will be pursued throughout this chapter, and remains a haunting witchery throughout subsequent chapters as well.

The metaphysics of presence is most lucidly illustrated in Bacon's rhetoric concerning dissection and vivisection where the prelapsarian state of Adam's knowing and naming animals is restored by scientific inquiry. In Genesis, God gave to Adam "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."<sup>9</sup> God brings each creature before Adam, who then names them.<sup>10</sup> This original act of naming is equated with knowing. The eighteenth-century physician Benjamin West calls natural history "the first study of the father of mankind, in the garden of Eden."<sup>11</sup> After the Fall and the babble that follows in its wake, naming as knowing is lost. The difference between Adam and the rest of us is succinctly summarized by Bacon's contemporary, Thomas Adam, in his *Meditations Upon Some Part of the Creed*:

Thus God gaue the nature to his creatures, *Adam* must giue the name: to shew they were made for him, they shall be what hee will vnto him. If *Adam* had

only called them by the names which God imposed, this had been the praise of his memory: but now to denominate them himselfe, was the approval of his Iudgement. At the first sight hee perceiued their dispositions, and so named them as God had made them. Hee at first saw all their insides, we his posterity ever since, with all our experience, can see but their skines.<sup>12</sup>

As Erica Fudge notes in *Perceiving Animals*, Adam's ability to name beasts is equated with his ability to see deeply. Such sight was a gift given to him by God. Through naming animals, the whole of the animal is made present to Adam and is knowable. Adam knows animals through and through. For Bacon and his contemporaries, banishment from Eden resulted in our inability to perceive animals and thus through perception, understand them. After the Fall, language is fractured and no longer coincides with the fullness of being of the things named. So for Bacon, where language and perception lack utility, science must make up the difference.

God gave Adam the ability to see the essence, the nature or ontic being of each animal. His seeing and naming are a knowing by which the intelligible aspect of each animal becomes the truth of this animal. Here signifier and signified, sign and object, representation and reality are in alignment. To know the name is to know the creature. In *The New Atlantis*, as elsewhere, Francis Bacon, who sees in science the possibility of restoring humanity to a prelapsarian state of knowing, equates dissection with just such a look below the skin. Nature is tortured into truth. As Fudge explains:

In the new science the object and the word coincide, there is no distinction between the signifier and the signified, the inside and the outside. . . . What exists beyond, as a third term—the referent—is the experimenter. There will always be someone performing the experiment, seeing the insides and the outsides, and it is the experimenter who is Bacon's human "for whensoever he shall be able to call the creatures by their true names he shall again command them." Adam the original namer, is the great vivisector: he sees beneath the skins. [Advocating vivisection as knowledge and control,] Bacon's Eden is never Edenic for the animal.<sup>13</sup>



Nature is turned inside out. The animal interiors become exteriors to be named and known. In cutting and opening the animal body, its witchery and mystery are turned aside by the knife. Holes and corners become open surfaces that are viewable, namable, and knowable. Unlike vacuous dark holes and corners, surfaces become pliable objects under human dominion. In cutting, the experimenter changes the animal and its otherness into flesh as an object consumed by reason. As Bacon explains in *The New Atlantis*, science is set for “enlarging of the bounds of human empire.”<sup>14</sup>

Through empirical investigation, Bacon wants to transform the world into intelligible objects. Underlying his method is an unspoken metaphysics of presence in which all of nature is opened to and made present by and for human inquiry. The foreignness of nature is overcome. In terms of animals, their strange and mysterious worlds and lives are transformed through death into objects of knowledge. Bacon justifies such violence as an act of dominion by which man reinstates his preeminence and grasps at his prelapsarian state. Once placed on the dissecting table or preserved in formaldehyde, animals are no longer so foreign and unknowable.

Returning for a moment to Hirst’s work, the opening of the animal and availability of animal insides for human inspection are perhaps nowhere more evident than in *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything* (1996, Figure 2). In the work, two cows have each been sliced into six even parts. The parts are placed in transparent tanks of formaldehyde and positioned in a line. The cows’ segments are shuffled one after the other, with the animals facing in opposite directions. The animal body is opened for interrogation. The outside hide and the inside flesh and viscera stand visible behind the glass. The viewer cannot touch nor be contaminated by the flesh, yet he or she has access to it as sight becomes a means of knowing and possessing.

With Bacon, access to animal insides facilitates a restoration to a purer spiritual state: the reinstatement of humans in the garden of Eden. For Hirst, the spiritual quality resides in the abstract movement that comes after the initial shock of seeing the carved animal. Recall Hirst’s statement that “animals become meat. That’s abstract.”<sup>15</sup> In *Some Comfort Gained*, the abstraction



FIGURE 2 Damien Hirst, *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything*, 1996. Glass, stainless steel, cow parts, and 5% formaldehyde solution.  $85.43 \times 40.16 \times 20.87$  in ( $2170 \times 1020 \times 530$  mm)  $\times 12$  tanks. © 2011 Hirst Holdings Limited and Damien Hirst. All rights reserved, ARS, New York / DACS, London.

appears in the title and in the arrangement of tanks such that, as the exhibition catalog explains, “Hirst presents a physical and spiritual union between partners, a desperate isolation in their merger.”<sup>16</sup> The animals do not feel this union, nor are they torn by its impossibility. As presented in the title, the “Lies” of such a “spiritual union” are human fables, and the “Comfort Gained” from debunking these fables is a human comfort. At no point is the animal or its world the subject of this art piece.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the full presence of its body as flesh is made available for the gesture of “that’s abstract.” The movement to abstraction extends Bacon’s “human empire” into the animal and its innards. No longer is the animal’s body its own, nor is its world of opaque holes or corners inaccessible to us. If the animal has a world outside of human knowledge, the logic of presence dictates that such a world is of no import. Only that which is present and presentable to “the perceiving and knowing subject” has status as being.<sup>18</sup> Hirst’s dissection and naming of his work takes up Bacon’s use of dissection to restore Adam’s naming and power over animals. The lie overturned in Hirst’s title is a human lie, and the

comfort gained is also human. If, as Fudge claims, “Bacon’s Eden is never Edenic for the animal,” then Hirst’s art is never beautiful for the animal.<sup>19</sup>

While animals appear to be central to Hirst’s dissection sculptures, they are not the focus of his work; instead, they are the material used to prod viewers into reflection. The interior of the animal is made exterior flesh so that we might visually take it in and reflect on it. These works are not about the animal’s death, though it may provide the initial shock; instead, if there is any lasting meaning in the work, it is gained in reflecting on our own interiors and the interiority of human thinking. The titles of Hirst’s work move us from the material object to abstract reflection on human states of affairs. *The Lovers’ Cabinets* is one such example. In the work, the entrails of eight cattle are placed in four jars in four cabinets; each jar and cabinet is given a name: “The Committed Lovers,” “The Spontaneous Lovers,” “Compromising Lovers,” and “Detached Lovers.” Cattle flesh becomes a figure for an abstract meditation on human desire.

For Hirst, the slicing and division of flesh operates as a figure for abstract diachronic tensions. Bodies are joined yet separated in *The Lovers’ Cabinets*, *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything*, and *Mother and Child, Divided*. Bodies and parts once together are now separate, and those once separate are now intertwined. This dynamic structure is analyzed by Mario Codognato in his reading of *Some Comfort Gained*:

They [the cattle] combine to construct a vision that is at once fragmentary and coherent, where our every expectation is mystified in a simultaneous perception of the habitual external appearance and the internal structure of the body, the mechanism of life and the condition of death, the stratagem of art and scientific investigation. The cross-over constructs a mental territory, where sensorial perceptions and reason temporarily enter into a diachronic and destabilizing relationship.<sup>20</sup>

As in much of the writing on Hirst, Codognato notes that the energy of the work resides in “a mental territory” for the viewer who tries to reconcile abstract concepts presented in the title with the sculpted material forms.

The epigraph to Codognato's essay on Hirst is particularly telling. He quotes Hamlet: "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into dew."<sup>21</sup> While for Hamlet the "sullied flesh" was his own, in Hirst, the flesh is that of animals. The animal and its flesh never "resolve[s] *itself* into dew"; however, the flesh is resolved by the viewer into a purer form—a translucent and shining dew of thought. It is the audience that transforms the material form into unsullied concepts—mental images of love, death, and desire. Dissection in Bacon is more than opening up the material of nature; in opening the animal (exposing interior as exterior flesh) and in naming the animal and its parts, Bacon seeks a spiritual end for man and a restoration to the Garden of Eden. In Hirst's work, animal flesh is put to human spiritual ends as well.<sup>22</sup>

#### EATING THE OTHER

In summary, we have seen in Hirst's work the **use of matter as the base from which to build a mental conflict that resolves itself in the mind. It is in human thought that the full presence of the animal form and the conceptual tensions that it suggests find resolution.** Hegel establishes a similar pattern of material violence and the demand for full presence of nature—every nook and cranny—as a means to a higher end. Perhaps nowhere is the voracious appetite of human thinking more explicit than in his search for absolute knowledge. While Hegel's idealism contrasts with Bacon's empiricism, the two meet in their transformation of the natural world through a metaphysics of presence. Hegel's clear articulation of this metaphysics as well as contemporary critiques of its violence make his work a useful means of explicating the cuts and corpses of Hirst's animal art.

As Lumsden explains, "philosophy has been concerned with establishing 'transcendental schema' by which we discern the truth of objects and the world and then organize it according to a rational and logical structure."<sup>23</sup> Like Bacon, Hegel created a schema meant to supplant Aristotle's logic. For Aristotle, objects have a self-contained singularity, and his logic proceeds by deductive reasoning as to the contents of these singularities. The essence of any thing is determined by its properties and what characteristics are

excluded. Man, for example, is defined as a rational animal, which assumes that man shares properties with other animals, but that reason is exclusive to humans. Aristotle's logic and his natural philosophy proceed by drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion; how these lines are drawn and who does the drawing are the fundamental concerns of his transcendental schema. Hegel considers Aristotle's logic as overly static in its lines of inclusion and exclusion; therefore Hegel sets out to create a system in which objects dynamically relate to one another. In his dialectical thinking, negations or contradictions are resolved by transformation into a synthesis or higher unity. His system moves toward a totality in which the totality overcomes yet preserves the lesser wholes that preceded it and from which it is constituted. In what is called the *aufhebung*, or sublation, nothing is lost or destroyed; instead, each whole is raised up to a higher level of meaning and being as it gets subsumed into a more expansive wholeness. My gambit here is that Hegel's organic logic of sublation is a means of describing the dynamics and tensions in Hirst's work, where matter is divided or opened up to create contradictions in need of resolution.

Hegel maintains that the transformation undergone in sublation is not an interpretation or representation of an object by a thinking subject, but instead is the most proper realization of the object:

By the act of reflection something is altered in the way in which the fact was originally presented in sensation, perception, or conception. Thus, as it appears, an alteration must be interposed before the true nature of the object can be discovered. . . . Now, at first sight, this seems an inversion of the natural order, calculated to thwart the very purpose on which knowledge is bent. But the method is not so irrational as it seems. It has been the conviction of every age that the only way of reaching the permanent substratum was to transmute the given phenomenon by means of reflection.<sup>24</sup>

This "alteration" or "transmut[ation]" is the site of metaphysical violence.<sup>25</sup> The witchery or mystery of nature (to use Merchant's terms) cannot be left

alone. Animals are not allowed a nook or hole or corner; instead, the mystery of nature is exchanged for the alchemy of transmutation, alteration, and sublation. In Hegel and in Hirst, all of nature is made present to thought, and gains fuller presence by thought.

For Hegel, thought liberates the universal from the singular and sensate instances of objects. Universalization—the move toward a totality and wholeness—is the fundamental project of philosophy. In his foreword to Hegel's *Logic*, John Niemeyer Findlay explains that

it is that activity conceived as a subject, itself universalised and given to itself, and not merely active in specific materials. The liberating activity of the Universal or the Ego is further said to be one that liberates the essential, intrinsic, or true nature of the object: it may profoundly change the manner in which things stand before us in sensation, intuition, or representation, but this change of manner is no subjective distortion as maintained in the Critical Philosophy: it is a bringing out of what the thing in itself truly is.<sup>26</sup>

In such a transcendental schema, there is no outside and no remainder. Nothing is lost nor destroyed; instead, it is transformed into “what the thing in itself truly is.” With sublation, everything becomes available for examination by thought, every experience is present to the conscious subject, and every object is internalized by the thinking subject.<sup>27</sup> Objects become meaningful only as they are made present to the knowing subject. Transmutation changes the object of knowledge from something external to the thinking subject to that which is present to the subject and then to that which is internalized. In short, we eat the other.

Eating is more than a metaphor for knowing. For Hegel, it is a moment in the upward spiral of sublation toward a greater totality and unity of being. As Romanticist scholar David Clark puts it: “For Hegel consumption and digestion are not merely illustrations of consciousness improperly borrowed from the naturalistic realm, but part of the underlying incorporative logic.”<sup>28</sup> Eating is “the power of overcoming the outer organism” and so building up

the interior subject.<sup>29</sup> Hegel's philosophy is a dialectic–hermeneutic circle; his *Encyclopedia* leverages the Greek root *circle*, by which all objects are encircled within the philosophy. As Howard Kainz explains, “this highly self-reflective system is described by Hegel as a ‘circle of circles.’”<sup>30</sup> Each circle within the dialectic turns upon itself, but also like a spire, it “gives rise to a wider circle” to become a “massive self-producing, self-justifying, and self-correcting system which demystifies, and works out the concrete details of Aristotle's primal presentation of the Idea as ‘self-thinking thought.’”<sup>31</sup> There is nothing outside the self-reflexive subject other than that which is to be eaten—either physically, or at the more refined plane of abstraction and mental appropriation.

We have seen this move in Bacon's treatment of animals, and Hegel joins Bacon in opening up the animal body. Eating exposes the animal interiors as exteriors of flesh—meat—for the human subject. At issue is how Bacon and Hegel make sense of that which is foreign or other than themselves. Hegel's dialectic logic pivots around its ability to ingest what is alien to the self, and so make it part of the self and sensible to oneself; stated differently, “digestion names the means by which the organism relates itself as an object, as other to itself.”<sup>32</sup> The outside—the animal—becomes a means by which human interiority can think itself. Damien Hirst's work functions as an Hegelian exercise inflected by natural history's demand for the full presence of nature in and through the death of animals. The animal serves as the other or outside by which we reflect on our own interiority.

### RESISTANT FLESH

It would be disingenuous to say that Hirst's art functions simply under Hegel's dialectic because there are important exceptions. Not all of the animals in Hirst's natural history works get split open to expose their insides. His well-known *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991, Figure 3) proves a useful instance of an artist wrestling with animal flesh and interiors. The work consists of a fourteen-foot tiger shark suspended in a tank of 5 percent solution formaldehyde. The shark's jaws are opened as

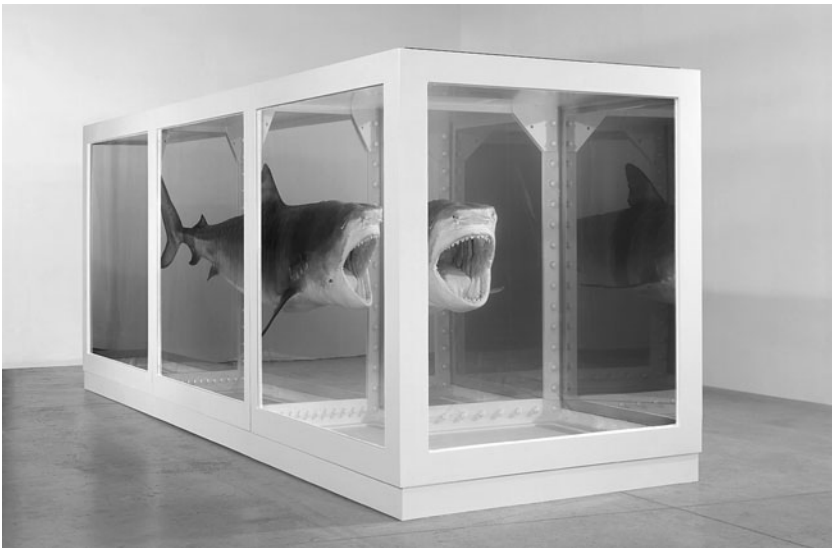


FIGURE 3 Damien Hirst, *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, 1991. Glass, steel, silicon, formaldehyde solution, and shark. 2170 × 5420 × 1800 mm. Photographed by Prudence Cuming Associates. © 2011 Hirst Holdings Limited and Damien Hirst. All rights reserved, ARS, New York / DACS, London.

if to emulate the sublimity and fear invoked by the fictional shark in the pop icon film *Jaws* (1975).<sup>33</sup> The shark piece was shown by Charles Saatchi in 1992, along with Hirst's *A Thousand Years*, as part of the Young British Artists show. The work was an immediate sensation. The popular press was aghast at the fish in a tank costing £50,000 to produce—£6,000 to acquire the shark (by commission from fishermen in Australia) with the remaining expenses for preservation, construction of a tank, and transportation. Yet despite—or perhaps because of—the controversy that swirled around the animal sculpture as a conceptual artwork, Hirst was nominated for the Turner Prize.

Hirst went on to garner fame and amass a fortune with his art and celebrity status—itself a sort of performance art. However, the shark did not hold up so well. *The Physical Impossibility of Death* began to decompose; the



formaldehyde was intended to arrest death, sealing the animal death into a singular moment prior to dissolution of the body. In this death without decay, the artist wanted the viewer to experience the sublimity of nature with teeth, yet the animal and not the human is the one dead. The decay of the shark began to cloud the pristine clarity of the problem of death to be contemplated by the viewer: the animal in decay obscured the sublimity of the artwork.

The shark decomposed because it was not adequately preserved. Getting the formaldehyde solution to penetrate through the skin of the animal and into its insides proved a difficult task that was never fully accomplished. Consequently, the animal began to decay from the inside out; its skin wrinkled, and the tank became murky. Hirst attributes at least part of the decay to the Saatchi Gallery adding bleach to the shark tank. After its initial display in 1992, the tank became increasingly clouded with decayed flesh, and the shark seemed to sag a bit. So in 1993, the gallery had the shark opened up and its flesh cut out. In place of the inner flesh, the gallery put a fiberglass form and molded the shark skin around it. Hirst was not satisfied with the results: "It didn't look as frightening. You could tell it wasn't real. It had no weight."<sup>34</sup> Interesting here is Hirst's investment in the animal interior as that which was never meant to be seen. His investment in an unseen interior is contrary to his other natural history works in which the insides are intended to be viewed. Visitors to the Saatchi Gallery were not told about the change, and most thought they were looking at an entire shark. Because the audience saw what they believed was a shark, and not a hollowed-out shark, Hirst's comments are curious. Others apparently did not see a massive animal corpse with no weight, so why was it an issue for him? And why would the lack of innards prevent the animal from appearing just as frightening?

Contrary to his work with dissected animals, opening up the shark to insert an artificial form violates the integrity of *The Physical Impossibility of Death*. In this particular piece, Hirst seems interested in preserving a place for the animal interior as something separate from the human world, something not to be opened. In this instance, because nature loves to hide, it is allowed to hide. Perhaps it does not hide fully—the shark's death was commissioned,

after all. However, the work can be seen to pivot around the idea that the dead shark “knows” something that is “physically impossible” for the “mind” of the human viewer. The reflexive interiority of the human subject does not gain access to the animal interior. Its body is not cut open as meat, and the Hegelian *aufhebung* is thwarted by the thickness of the animal’s skin and flesh. The shark’s innards bore witness to the inaccessible interior of the animal—an interior that the artist could not penetrate with formaldehyde and that he intended to protect from the view of spectators. Yet it is this preservation of the interior of the animal that could not be preserved by Hirst: the animal rotted from the inside out. The clouded tank with its bits of decayed flesh exposed the interior of the animal that was meant to be sealed off from sight.

When Saatchi sold the piece to Steven Cohen in 2006, Hirst proposed replacing the shark with a new tiger shark. Cohen funded the endeavor, which cost in excess of \$100,000. Buoyed by these finances and years of practice in working with formaldehyde, Hirst took to preserving another shark and placing it in the same tank in which the former animal had failed to hold up to the artist’s wishes. Some of the details of the undertaking are worth noting in order to appreciate the degree of labor involved in maintaining the artist’s concept of a whole predatory animal suspended in a tank. Carol Vogel describes the preservation project in her site visit and interview with Hirst for the *New York Times*.<sup>35</sup> In a pool-size tank at an abandoned hangar of the Royal Air Force station in Gloucestershire, Hirst and five assistants stand in 224 gallons of formaldehyde working over a thirteen-foot tiger shark. The shark’s body is penetrated with hundreds of needles to inject it with the formaldehyde (Figure 4). The needles vary in length to reach various surfaces and depths—nooks and crannies—of the animal body. These needles minimally open up the animal interior and so leave the body intact and removed from visual inspection.

While the extremity of cost and effort in this work appears to be part of the “sensation,” or sensational quality, for which Hirst is known, one wonders why he went to such financial and physical expenditure for what will never be



FIGURE 4 Damien Hirst and assistants preserving a tiger shark, 2006. Photograph by Steve Forrest / *The New York Times* / Redux.

seen—the inside of the shark’s body. It is precisely this invisibility that makes the work intriguing. *The Physical Impossibility of Death* is powerful because of the interplay between the interior of the animal and the viewer’s own interiority. The animal insides are not only the interior of the animal, but they also mark a unique space, a space that we will never know—the space that death has inhabited in this animal. Despite the prevalent demand for full presence of the animal—a demand met in dissection—in this work, absolute knowledge and full presence is denied to the viewer. We sense that there is something beneath the surface of the animal, and we know that Hirst and his team have taken great pains to preserve this interior, which seems more significant than “mere” flesh, as if the animal had an interior self. Such this imagined shark self would be the animal’s means of knowing and engaging the world outside of our ability to comprehend or colonize the animal.

## REVISING AN ARCHITECTURE OF PRESENCE

Hirst hints at something beneath the surface of animals in his cleverly titled *Something Solid Beneath the Surface of All Creatures Great and Small* (2001, Figure 5). Yet the “something solid” is most readily identified as the bare bones of the animal bodies put on display in glass cases as if in a natural history museum exhibit. If there is an animal interiority as “something solid,” we cannot see it on display here. The work responds to *The Physical Impossibility of Death* by showing that there is no empirical space of animal interiority; there are only layers of interiors to be exposed. This inability to find a material



FIGURE 5 Damien Hirst, *Something Solid Beneath the Surface of All Creatures Great and Small*, 2001. Nickel plated stainless steel and glass cabinet with animal skeletons. 81 × 148 × 48 in (2057.4 × 3759.2 × 1219.2 mm). © 2011 Hirst Holdings Limited and Damien Hirst. All rights reserved, ARS, New York / DACS, London.

interiority has been a historical rationale for licensing dissection. The interiority, if it exists, is immaterial—meaning that to humans, the animal place of its own is inconsequential; however, animal interiority may be immaterial simply in the same way that human interiority is also not visible bones nor flesh.

While Hirst's other natural history works open the animal for inspection, the restored *The Physical Impossibility of Death* and even *Something Solid Beneath the Surface* maintain the veil over nature. They allow for trace or specter of interiority of the animal as a space not visible, namable, and knowable to us. As outlined previously, the predominant strand in Western philosophy and science has been to demand a full presence from the animal; however, there is a less well-known tradition that seeks to preserve the space of the animal as something inaccessible and unknowable. In his final dialogues on epistemology, Cicero considers the value of cutting open animal bodies: "This is why doctors . . . have carried out dissections, in order to see this emplacement of organs. As the Empiricist physicians say, however, the organs are no better known, for it may be that if they are uncovered and deprived of their envelopes, they are modified."<sup>36</sup> Cicero did not believe in an agonistic struggle against nature; teasing nature from its hiding place is itself unnatural and results in a perversion of knowledge.

More striking is the claim by the German Romantic philosopher and natural scientist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. For Goethe, nature is visible, but we do not have a mind that can see her. As Valentine warns the wayward Faust:

We snatch in vain at Nature's veil,  
 She is mysterious in broad daylight,  
 No screws or levers can compel her to reveal  
 The secrets she has hidden from our sight.<sup>37</sup>

Hadot notes that "her real veil consists in having no veil; in other words, she hides because we do not know how to see her, although she is right before

our eyes.”<sup>38</sup> Visibility and knowability are turned upside down. While dissection opens the invisible to make it visible and intelligible, Goethe claims that nature is already in the light of day though it remains obscure to us: it is visible—already opened up—but never knowable. Following Goethe’s claim, opening up an animal does not equate to knowing the animal. Light does not equal knowledge in this case, and presence is still a sort of absence or mystery. If dissection is meant to open a space for full presence and knowledge—by which we know/consume the animal flesh—then Goethe has created a different sort of architecture of knowing. Here nature is in the open, but remains invisible, unintelligible.

Twentieth-century phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty extends the significance of the invisible. While preparing his unfinished text *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty noticed a fundamental problem within his earlier work: phenomenology made its break with Cartesian philosophy and the mind–body problem by pursuing perceptual knowing rather than abstract or disembodied knowledge. However—and herein lies the issue—both abstract knowledge and perceptual knowledge maintain a divide between subject and object. The persistence of such a divide troubled Merleau-Ponty. As Renaud Barbaras summarizes the issue, after *Phenomenology of Perception*, “the relevant opposition for him is not the opposition between a philosophy of reflexive consciousness and a philosophy of embodied consciousness, but between an ontology of the object—to which both of these philosophies refer—and a new kind of ontology, which he must delineate.”<sup>39</sup> Reflective consciousness from Descartes to Hegel to Merleau-Ponty maintains the privileged interiority of the human subject through which all objects gain meaning in the act of human knowing, be it perceptual knowing or abstract reflection.

Merleau-Ponty observes that phenomenology “succeeds in overcoming the natural attitude by changing the beings into their meaning but is mistaken in defining the meaning itself as *essence*, namely, as something fully positive and clearly determined, a plenitude attainable by an intellectual intuition.”<sup>40</sup> We grasp the essence of the object through its appearance—a natural attitude critically reflected on in phenomenology; however, phenomenology is

mistaken in describing the meaning gleaned from appearance as the essence of the thing. The problem here is that essence maintains a sense of plenitude, of something full and fully present as grasped by an intellect. Such perception implies a perceiving subject with consciousness and a self-consciousness. This subject discerns presence from absence of contemplation, or nonpresence. As mentioned earlier, Hirst grapples with the problem of the subject–object divide, first with his natural history displays, which establish subject–object relationships, and then in a more complex fashion with *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. Here perception by the human with reflexive consciousness is of no help—it is “physically impossible”—in understanding shark as anything other than object. Its life and its death and deadness cannot be grasped by “the mind of someone living.” What Hirst provides is not (as Merleau-Ponty critiques) “something fully positive and clearly determined, a plenitude attainable by an intellectual intuition.” Rather we are haunted by the veil that remains before us but is impossible to lift.

Merleau-Ponty wants to avoid the perception of presence as equated with knowledge. In *Visible and Invisible*, he gestures toward a new kind of being “against the philosophy of the thing and the philosophy of the idea. Philosophy of ‘something’—something not nothing.”<sup>41</sup> Such a philosophy would allow for “something” without the need for full presence, and a conscious subject to discern the seemingly vague “something” as a “thing” or object rather than a nothing. Barbaras explains that Merleau-Ponty moves from a “philosophy of the positive [full and fully present] thing to a philosophy of *something*.”<sup>42</sup> As the title *Visible and Invisible* implies, visibility and knowability are but the one side of something: vision and knowing do not take place as immanent or transparent presence of the thing known before the perceiving subject; rather, vision and knowledge imply distance and violence. They also imply an invisibility—what cannot be seen or opened to our understanding. Such invisibility is “not nothing,” as if the object can only either exist or not exist; instead, the tension between the visible and invisible describes the opacity of the world of stuff itself within a world of perceptions, rather than a

feature of human consciousness.<sup>43</sup> Opacity is not a consequence of our failed sense organs, but rather the nature of things in a world of perception. Withdrawal or invisibility is an essential part of the being of beings: animals withdraw beyond the horizon of our world and our understanding.

Returning to Hirst's *Something Solid Beneath the Surface of All Creatures Great and Small*, there is indeed "something" beneath the surface of creatures. It is not a thing, an object, but a "something" in Merleau-Ponty's sense of this term. This something is not available to us. We cannot open up the animal in order to find it. The natural history display of skeletal forms exhibited by Hirst gives us only the bare bones, but not the solidity of the animal's "something"—a space apart from human perception. At the limit of our perception we encounter the friction and opacity of other ways of being that remain inaccessible to us. Following Goethe, this something of the animal is an open secret. Hirst's works are a series of structures around the limits of access to this secret approached through the tradition of lifting nature's veil.



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